

The Curious Case of the Buried Locomotives—or Railroad Archeology with a Vengeance

The White Pass & Yukon Route consisted of a transportation complex including a railway first organized in 1897, before the Yukon gold rush led to the building of a narrow gauge line from Skaguay (as it was then spelled), across the mountains into Canada to the Yukon River, below a number of portages at a point that would come to be named Whitehorse. Construction extended from 1898 to 1900, resulting in about 110 miles of three-foot gauge railroad divided into three companies. The Pacific and Arctic Railway and Navigation Company operated the 20.4 miles of railroad in Alaska Territory, the British Columbia Yukon Railway operated the 47.1 miles of railroad in the Canadian province of British Columbia, and the British Mining, Trading and Transportation Company (later renamed the British Yukon Railway), operated the 43.2 miles in Canada's Yukon Territory. But all three railways operated under the umbrella name "White Pass & Yukon Route" (WP&YR); note "Route," not "Railway." The WP&YR umbrella later encompassed the British Yukon Navigation Company, which oper-

ated stern-wheel steamboats on the upper Yukon River and Lake Atlin in Canada; and the American Yukon Navigation Company, which operated boats on the lower Yukon River in Alaska Territory. Eventually, the WP&YR included a bus line, an airline, and a number of the world's first container ships.

The river and lake boats, bus line, and airline are long gone today, but the railway still operates in Alaska and British Columbia (although it is idle in the Yukon Territory), and hauls thousands of tourists off cruise liners out of Skagway (as it is now spelled) each summer.

For much of its history, however, the railway had to struggle to exist, eking out only modest profits. In 1949, the Skagway River began chewing into the edge of the grade or roadbed of the track just outside of Skagway, and the railway needed to dump some impediment to this erosion. No easy source of large hunks of rock came to mind. However, the company had a number of retired and long-obsolete 40- or 50-year-old locomotives cluttering the Skagway Yard, and decided to dump five of these locomotives, along with a rotary snowplow, along the edge of the grade to serve as riprap and protect the bank.

Thus, in 1949, the railway dumped the first two locomotives at Milepost 2.5: Nos. 60 and 61, both built by the Baldwin Locomotive Works. No. 60 had been built in May, 1900, as a narrow gauge, outside-frame 4-6-0 type or "ten-wheeler," typically used for passenger traffic. No. 61, built in June of the same year, was a 2-8-0 or "consolidation"-type freight locomotive. The railroad had "retired" No. 60 in 1942 and No. 61 in 1944, and both of these worn-out locomotives had been cluttering the Skagway Yard ever since; no local scrap dealers existed, and it would have cost more to ship the hulks to Vancouver or Seattle than they were worth as scrap. Also in 1949, the railway dumped Locomotive No. 62,

White Pass & Yukon Route outside-frame narrow gauge 4-6-0 locomotive No. 60, excavated from use as riprap along the Skagway River in Alaska.





White Pass & Yukon Route narrow gauge 2-8-0 locomotive No. 61.

another Baldwin 4-6-0, built in June, 1900, and retired in 1945, at Milepost 2.3. In 1951, the railway dumped yet a third outside-frame Baldwin 4-6-0, No. 67, built in May, 1901, and retired in 1945, at an unknown location along the Skagway River. Subsequently, the railway also dumped a second-hand rotary snowplow as riprap. In time, the railroad bulldozed gravel or earth over the locomotives, and they became, truly, “archeological sites” of a railroad nature.

Outside-frame narrow gauge locomotives were not a common type; the drive wheels were mounted on the axles inside the frames, with the bearings in the frames beyond the outer side of the wheels, and with the driver counterweights located at the ends of the axles outside the frames. This arrangement gave the larger narrow gauge locomotives better balance, but smaller, earlier narrow gauge locomotives did not have outside frames, and comparatively few outside-frame “ten-wheelers” or 4-6-0 types ever operated in the United States. Thus, the three outside-frame 4-6-0s dumped as riprap along the Skagway River are fairly rare locomotives.

Locomotive Nos. 60 and 61 were retrieved from the river and dumped on the ground on their sides outside of Skagway about a decade ago. It seems desirable to retrieve the other two 4-6-0s as well. All built by Baldwin within about a year, the three locomotives would have interchangeable parts. It would be possible to do a “cosmetic” restoration of at least one of the locomotives to its original appearance, cleaning it of mud and rust, applying a new boiler jacket of sheet metal over hardwood lagging on top of the boiler, building a new wooden cab and a new wooden pilot or “cowcatcher,” and providing a tender. It would be desirable to restore the one 2-8-0 as well.

In addition to dumping the locomotives, the railway dumped seven bodies of tenders in a little hollow below the Skagway City Cemetery on the side of the tracks away from the river, opposite the hulk of Locomotive No. 62, which lies on the river side. Perhaps one of these tender bodies was of the type needed for a 4-6-0. It would undoubtedly need a new wooden frame and new trucks. Restoration of the original physical appearance of one or two of these locomotives would not be easy or cheap, but it is feasible, and, in view of their rarity, highly desirable.

The story of the White Pass & Yukon Route—and especially of the Pacific and Arctic Railway and Navigation Company, which operated that part of the line that lay within the United States—is a part of the history of the Klondike gold rush of 1898-1900. That history is commemorated and preserved today at Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in Skagway. Here lies a rare opportunity for the National Park Service and the City of Skagway to resurrect and restore to their early appearance a couple of the early locomotives of the railroad that played a key role in a part of history they seek to preserve.*

Note

* The railroad renumbered its locomotives in 1899 beginning with the number 51 for old No. 1, so Nos. 60 and 61 actually were the 10th and 11th of the 51 steam and 26 diesel-electric locomotives the company eventually owned (a total to date of 77 locomotives). Thus, Nos. 60 and 61 were not the 60th and 61st locomotives on the railroad, as one would assume. Furthermore, the railway started operation with a variety of second-hand locomotives, some of them short-lived. Nos. 60 and 61 actually were only the fourth and fifth locomotives built new to the order of the railroad and put in service the year the railroad reached completion. Some of the later steam locomotives actually were owned and operated by the Army but used on the railroad during World War II.

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Photos by Carl Gurcke, 1999.